



March 9th, 2021

Re: Black and Brown United in Action Testimony IN SUPPORT of House Bill No. 6578 - An Act Concerning Participation in the Electoral Process; and IN SUPPORT of Senate Bill No. 1017- An Act Concerning Election Administration

Dear members of the Government Administration and Elections (GAE) Committee,

We are Black and Brown United In Action, a grassroots organization located in New Haven, Connecticut and are testifying in support of HB. 6578 and SB. 1017. Black and Brown United in Action recognizes racism as a public health crisis. As you know, the United States is a contradiction. Its founding principles embrace the ideals of freedom and equality, but it is a nation built on the systematic exclusion and suppression of Black and Brown people. From the start, so many of this country's laws and public policies, which should serve as the scaffolding that guides progress, were instead designed explicitly to prevent Black and Brown, disabled and elderly people from fully participating. Moreover, these legal constructs are not some relic of antebellum or Jim Crow past but rather remain part of the fabric of American policymaking. Voting is a right and a responsibility of all citizens, and voter registration and voting should be more convenient and accessible.

We support HB. 6578 because the inability of members of society to fully participate in the democratic process translates voter suppression as participation is limited by systematic boundaries and also a lack of political power - the power to elect candidates with shared values and the power to enact public policy priorities. Additionally, Black people continue to endure exclusion and discrimination in the electoral process, more than 150 years after the abolition of slavery. A recent secure democracy public opinion poll found 77% of Connecticut voters support Automatic Voter Registration (AVR). Data from across the country showed that localities improved voter participation by implementing AVR. From the day Alaska, California, Colorado, D.C., Georgia, Oregon, Rhode Island and Vermont first implemented AVR through their 2018 voter-registration deadline, 2 those eight places automatically registered around 2.2 million new voters. Also, as many as 6 million existing voters who interacted with a government agency had their voter registrations automatically updated — for example, by replacing an outdated address. Currently 19 states have adopted AVR.

Furthermore, felony disenfranchisement serves no legitimate purpose. More disconcerting, these laws are rooted in the Jim Crow era and were designed to lock freed slaves out of the voting process. It is time to remove this barrier and contributor to voter suppression. As voter suppression efforts continue to grab national headlines, one suffrage movement is gaining momentum across the country: The fight to restore voting rights to formerly incarcerated people. Our criminal justice system disproportionately targets Black and Brown people for arrest and incarceration, and then strips them of their political power. Right here in Connecticut, those on parole are generally concentrated in Black and Brown communities. In November 2018, nearly two-thirds of voters in Florida restored voting rights to 1.4 million people in that state who were

previously subjected to lifetime disenfranchisement for a felony conviction. In 2019, states as varied as Minnesota, Iowa, New Mexico, Kentucky and Louisiana – to name a few – moved to restore voting rights or reduce registration barriers for people with criminal records as it was realized that states that strip people with felony convictions of their voting rights face higher recidivism rates than states that restore the right to vote. Connecticut has the most stringent criminal disenfranchisement laws in the Northeast and it is the only state in the region that still prohibits those on parole from casting a ballot.

We support SB. 1017 because it is integral to ending voter suppression and engaging voters. Given the increased Black and Brown voter participation in 2020, and recognizing the needs of the disabled and elderly communities, it is imperative for absentee voters retain the freedom they had in 2020 to use their town's official, secure ballot drop boxes. Also in 2020, data showed that a slim majority (54%) voted in person, compared to the 46% who voted absentee or mail-in. Voting is one of our fundamental rights as U.S. citizens. Absentee voting encourages voter participation, which is why ballot drop boxes must be permanent.

It is critical to have an inclusivity in the voting process to ensure the true needs of the community are recognized and the people are included in government. Voting allows the people to choose their representatives in the government. The purpose of government is to develop and implement various policies for the benefit of its community. Voting also enables the person with the right to question the government about issues and clarifications. Voting is crucial to activating the democratic process. On the day of the election, voters won't just have the capacity to choose their representatives in government for the following term, they can also decide on measures like security issues that concede the government authority to borrow funds for development projects and different advancements and in some cases, voters cast their voting sheets on social issues. Black and Brown United in Action asks you to support HB. 6578 and SB. 1017 as a move toward ending voter suppression and engaging a true democratic process.

Sincerely,

Black and Brown United in Action